

In recent weeks, vacant land has kept me busy. In general, land stays on the market far longer than homes, however, with our current residential inventory fairly low and buyers wanting new or updated construction, land is being considered more frequently.

I should point out, before I dive into the details of land transactions, the importance of selecting a real estate broker or agent who has a deep knowledge of land and how the process works. Having an agent who specializes in land will help you greatly through the process.

My focus is now on residential real estate but what most may not know is that my background is in land assemblage and development. I spent my first several years in real estate working with developers through land identification, assemblage and the entitlement process (in my case, the creation of lots for the purpose of development and residential building - ie. a 20 acre parcel may have been divided into 30 vacant lots to build homes on each of those lots). It was, and still is, tremendously rewarding seeing how things unfold. Ultimately, it can take years from start to finish!

Fortunately, this is typically not the case if you have the proper zoning for your use. For example, you would like to build a single family home and are considering vacant land with residential or agricultural zoning, you can skip the more complicated, time consuming steps like a general plan amendment or zone change. Yippee!! And within proper zoning, most issues can be negotiated and resolved.

In Santa Barbara County, getting a building permit issued can be a lengthy and tiresome process, but the end result has the potential to be very rewarding. It is of the utmost importance to hire a land use consultant if you are considering building a home. Not only can a professional help you to decide whether or not a particular land parcel is right for you, they can also guide you through the permitting process with far greater ease. They have relationships with the people at the planning department, the fire department, the environmental health department (the list goes on) and they know the detailed items that are required by these departments.

Once your real estate professional has helped you to identify your property, you may wish to hire a land use consultant to complete a feasibility study. I typically recommend David Swenk of Urban Planning Concepts because of his in-depth knowledge of the process. We only have a handful of firms in Santa Barbara County. Depending on what has occurred on the property in the past, you may also choose to have a Phase 1 investigation, which will uncover potentially costly environmental issues. If you are working with completely raw, undeveloped land, your land use consultant will likely recommend a survey, a percolation test and a soils report, among other things. These are all to determine property boundaries and whether or not your property is a candidate for a septic system. In the case that a sewer hookup is available, you will likely be able to forego the percolation test. Having a sewer hookup makes the process that much easier. In order to build, two major components are adequate access to the property and potable water. Without these two items, a building permit will not be issued. In some cases, you will need an archeological study to be sure there are no artifacts on the property, but not always. It's also important to determine whether or not you will be subject to architectural review, though once you are at this point, you have likely hired an architect and other professionals. One other piece

to consider early in the game is the potential need for a fire hydrant and/or turnaround. Your land use planner and the Santa Barbara County Fire Captain can help with this.

The County of Santa Barbara planning department states the following:

"Our staff provides initial plan review for smaller projects (less than 600 square feet) within ten (10) working days from the date of submittal. Initial plan reviews for larger projects (greater than 600 square feet) are provided within 30 calendar days from the date of submittal."

One thing to remember though is that the county almost always comes back with comments or revisions to your plan, and this can happen more than once, so the process continues until an agreement is reached.

I have not listed additional steps, as I do not wish to bore or overwhelm you, but they include a proposed development review period, plan check, grading and engineering plans, power and water availability, etc etc etc. The remaining steps really depend on your location, zoning, lot size and the availability of infrastructure. These items are unique to every project.

I have worked closely with clients and consultants alike throughout the land purchasing and development process and I am here to help and to answer your questions.

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